

LIVING ON BOOKS

"How did you happen to lose your family?" Imre asked suddenly.

Szami settled that with a short, "I ran away," But Imre's next question was harder. What had he been doing for two years? How had he earned a living?

Imre, for the first time in his life, found Szami - of all people - unwilling to talk. It took considerable repetition and urging to get a reply.

"I...I lived," Szami said at last, "on books."

"Books!" Imre's surprise complete. Szami and books were arch enemies, like fire and water; how they had managed to get together was worth finding out. "Books? ...but how could you live on books?"

"Oh...easily enough, by selling them."

"You mean you were in the book trade?"

"Sort of ...Anyway, I sold them."

"But how did you get them?"

"...I begged for them."

It was a strange statement; the ashy moonlight on Szami's face underlined its strangeness. Imre was at a loss.

"Books?"

"Books?"

Szami finally felt that some explanation was due.

"You see", he said slowly, "I tried to beg for food, and I couldn't. The words just wouldn't come out. I could feel them in my mouth, just "Give me bread"- it had a taste-words themselves were almost like bread. You wouldn't believe it, but it's true: they felt lump, as if they were glued to my throat- and couldn't get out.

"What did you do?"

"I would try, at one peasant's house after another - then just ask for the time, thank them and leave - again and again. Then I left the peasants alone. I picked some fruits from the trees along the road and lived on that for days. Then, when I couldn't stand it any longer, I went to a big house.... You wouldn't believe the way they looked at you when you start to ask for something and don't offer anything in return. I never saw that kind of look on a face before...Well, that's how it started. I saw books lying around on chairs and tables, even on the floor; you could see they were very well liked, those books, or they'd been put on shelves and kept clean.... That's what gave me the idea. I said I was a student very poor, and I needed books - any books. History or literature or school books - from the Fourth Gymnasium up. That was right for my age, you see; besides, that's the kind of books they would have. And they gave them to me; I got books at every single house. They wouldn't have given me food: people would rather give away books. They liked their stomachs better than their heads, and they are much more friendly if you tell them it's your mind that's hungry, if you don't spoil their dinners by reminding them that they have left you out - that a fellow-being is starving..."

The two boys huddled into their jackets; they were chilly.

"I sold those first books in the next town, without even looking at their titles, just offered them for sale at the first book-store. Then I begged new ones in that town and sold them in the next.

... That time I read a line or two. Later I read whole pages, then whole story. It was interesting, so after that I read them all before I sold them. Some of them were so good that I liked them so much; it broke my heart to sell them. But they were heavy, and though my business was getting better, I was still hungry. So I couldn't keep any, I just read them."

He laughed nervously.

"Read them as I hiked ... I've read a lot of books in two years- hundreds of them - all while walking. I guess plenty of people can read faster than I can - but not while walking. If there were some competition for walking readers, I'm sure I'd be the champion."

"Er...hm..er, I bet you would!"

From the book "Fool's Apprentice"- by Martin Munkacsi.